

In 1917, Eddie Rickenbacker already was a rich and famous man. Then, he volunteered at sergeant's pay and became this nation's "Ace of Aces."

Rickenbacker

ANYONE seeking to define "warrior" can do it with a single word: Rickenbacker. Capt. Eddie Rickenbacker was a warrior in two wars, becoming the American Ace of Aces in 1918 and demonstrating rare leadership and courage in World War II. Rick, as he liked to be called, never ceased to watch out for the interests of the United States.

Beloved by many, hated by not a few, Rickenbacker was the quintessential American leader-patriot of the 20th century, a man who fought to protect his interests and to promote those of the United States. He also had his weaknesses, including an inability to bear fools lightly, a predisposition to speak rashly, and a cranky insistence that co-workers give a 110 percent effort.

He was born in Columbus, Ohio, in 1890, the son of Swiss immigrants. His surname originally was spelled Rickenbacher. The Teutonic sound of it caused Rickenbacker many problems and, as a result of World War I, he changed it. In 1918, he became Eddie "Rickenbacker"—with the change of that single letter somehow giving him comfort.

His father, William, was a day laborer who regularly beat him with a switch. Rickenbacker responded by becoming a juvenile delinquent—a small-time petty thief and bully who was so quick with his fists that his impoverished parents feared he would wind up in reform school. Yet when his father was murdered on the job, young Edd, as he was then called, underwent a transformation.

He was not quite 14, but he assumed responsibility for his family, a task usually shouldered by an eldest son. (Rickenbacker did have an

older brother.) Rickenbacker immediately dropped out of school to begin working 72-hour weeks in a sweatshop glass factory. At this job, he earned a nickel per hour—\$182 per year. He didn't have to spend a year there, though, for he was at the start of a Horatio Alger career that would see him swiftly take on a series of ever more responsible jobs for which he was both too young and too uneducated.

His swift ascendancy in part was fueled by the courses he took from the International Correspondence School, an institution that helped many a poor lad, Walter Chrysler among them. By age 17, he was supervising more than a dozen adult professionals in an experimental engineering laboratory for the Columbus Buggy Co., which was then launching a new line of automobiles.

Racing and Riches

Rickenbacker was on the road to riches. He found he was a natural salesman and manager. Soon he was earning \$150 a month at a time when lawyers and doctors made less. By age 19, he was 6 feet, 2 inches tall, weighed 165 pounds, and was sharpening his skills as a professional racing car driver. Within a few years, he had reached the top of his new profession, earning \$60,000 the last year he raced. That was the equivalent today of \$1 million.

As a driver, Rickenbacker was shrewd and savvy, carefully preplanning his races to maximize his advantages. He developed practical leadership skills and drilled his pit crew into teams able to change tires and refuel faster than any competitor. In his prerace planning, Rickenbacker took account of the track,

By Walter J. Boyne

Capt. Eddie Rickenbacker leans against a World War I aircraft with the famous Hat in the Ring insignia of the 94th Pursuit Squadron.





Shown here in a Maxwell at the Indianapolis Motor Speedway with his mechanic, Rickenbacker had gained celebrity status as a race car driver even before he became a flying ace in World War I.

weather conditions, and the way his equipment stacked up to the competition. Then, he drove with cool precision, pushing the envelope of risk but without recklessness.

He developed a smiling public persona. His race colleagues thought of him as a mean driver, one who used any trick he could devise to win. It was good training for a future fighter pilot.

He did not let his celebrity go to his head, for he was painfully aware of his lack of education. Rickenbacker took self-improvement courses and always tried to expand his vocabulary. Now Rickenbacker, frequently thrust into exalted company, watched how leaders in politics and business behaved and began to emulate their actions. (In his mid-20s, he noted that these individuals had middle initials, which he lacked. He selected V, and then selected "Vernon" to go with it.)

In 1916, Britain was at war, but the Sunbeam Motor Car Co. invited Rickenbacker to England in hopes he would build a team to race Sunbeam cars in America. English intelligence was convinced that Rickenbacker was a German secret agent. It kept Rickenbacker under close watch around the clock.

Far from being pro-German, however, Rickenbacker itched to fight for the Allied cause. He proposed creating an air squadron composed solely of race-driver friends. The US Army shrugged off his idea as impractical.

When the US entered the war in April 1917, Rickenbacker volunteered and became an Army staff driver, exchanging celebrity status and high income for a sergeant's pay. He went to France confident that he could worm his way into the flying service, trading his steering wheel for a joystick.

Chauffeur to Pilot

In France, Rickenbacker proved an excellent chauffeur. (Some claim he drove for Gen. John J. "Black Jack" Pershing, the commander of the American Expeditionary Forces in France. He did not.) On one trip, he impressed Col. Billy Mitchell with his roadside repairs of their Hudson staff car. Mitchell, who drove wildly and furiously himself, liked having the personable and famous Rickenbacker drive for him.

An old Rickenbacker friend, Capt. James Ely Miller, was tasked to supervise the buildup at Issoudun of a huge new flight training center for American aviation cadets. Running into Rickenbacker in Paris, Miller asked him to become his engineering officer, a crucially important job and one for which Rickenbacker was eminently well-suited. Rickenbacker quickly agreed, on the condition that he could take flight training. Miller agreed, and Rickenbacker persuaded Mitchell to release him. It remained only for him to fudge his true age and fake his way through his physical (he had vision problems). He was in.

Rickenbacker entered France's primary flying school at Tours, starting on the little clipped-wing Penguins and soloing after only two hours with an instructor pilot. He racked up 25 flying hours in 17 days and graduated as a first lieutenant in the Signal Corps. He was now an officer and a gentleman and was headed straight for trouble at Issoudun.

It was a kind of class war. From the start, aviation attracted wealthy students from some of America's elite colleges and universities. The Yale Units and the Lafayette Escadrille personified this staking out of air combat as a "gentleman's" game.

More than 1,000 young pilot candidates, many from top schools and America's wealthy families, found themselves sent to Issoudun for training, only to find that construction of the 3rd Aviation Instruction Center was far from complete. They came expecting to go immediately into flight training. Instead, the Army put them to work constructing roads, buildings, latrines, railroad spurs, and hangars, often under the supervision of the newly commissioned roughneck, Eddie Rickenbacker.

Worse, while they labored in the mud, former colleagues who had remained in the US were arriving as commissioned officers.

Furious with the system, the cadets took out their anger on Rickenbacker, openly mocking his poor grammar and rough language. In his autobiography, Rickenbacker writes that he understood how these men could resent the fact that he, a "Swiss-German engineer with a grammar school education," had authority over them. In truth, their remarks deeply angered Rickenbacker. He got even by assigning them even rougher tasks, such as digging latrines.

Hard Driver

Had the cadets been more mature, they might have seen that Rickenbacker was driving himself harder than any of them, trying to transform Issoudun from muddy fields into a flying school. Unknown to them, he spent all his spare time bootlegging ground school and flying training. He persuaded tough Maj. Carl Spaatz to let him go to gunnery school at Cazaux to prepare for assignment to an operational squadron.

The first two operational units, the 94th and 95th Pursuit Squadrons, were

stationed at Villeneuve-les-Vertus, 20 miles behind the front. In March 1918, as pilots and mechanics began to assemble, their new Nieuport 28 fighters began to dribble in.

At \$18,500 each, the Nieuport 28 was one of the war's most expensive fighters, as well as one of the most beautiful. It was powered by a 160-hp Gnome rotary engine, making it fast and maneuverable. France was glad to sell the Nieuports to the US; its own military had declined to use them. They knew that its delicate lines concealed serious design flaws.

The tremendous vibration gener-

Gervais Raoul Lufbery, a kindred spirit if ever one existed. Lufbery had distinguished himself with the Lafayette Escadrille, downing 17 enemy airplanes. The word in the Escadrille was that his score was much higher, but the taciturn Lufbery usually flew alone and rarely reported his kills.

Fellow Mechanic

Lufbery was assigned to the 94th Pursuit Squadron, Rickenbacker's squadron. It was going into action soon, and the Americans wanted Lufbery to help guide the squadron's

entrance into combat. Lufbery and Rickenbacker, both former mechanics, hit it off right away. They understood engines and the men who worked on them and regarded grease under the fingernails as a badge of honor. Lufbery tutored Rickenbacker, escorting him on his first flight over the lines. Rickenbacker later said, "Everything I learned, I learned from Lufbery."

Rickenbacker spent much of his spare time on the ground working with the mechanics to improve the performance of the Nieuports. In other squadrons, the Gnome engines normally ran 30 hours before they required an overhaul. At the 94th, Rickenbacker helped the mechanics find ways to drill the cylinders to increase the lubrication. In so doing, the engine's time between overhauls more than doubled.

Rickenbacker's work with the mechanics generated contempt among the squadron's more cultured members. His poor grammar and his profanity were still regarded as the signs of a blue-collar worker, not an officer.

Rickenbacker discovered that, when aloft, he saw only a small percentage of what was going on in the air. Worse, he found he had a tendency to get airsick when he followed the cautious corkscrew evolutions that Lufbery used to avoid being surprised. In time he overcame both difficulties and concentrated on two goals: to be the first in the squadron to shoot down



Rickenbacker (center) poses next to a Spad with fellow 94th Pursuit Squadron pilots (l-r) 1st Lt. Joseph Eastman, Capt. James Meissner, 1st Lt. Reed Chambers, and 1st Lt. Thorne Taylor.

ated by the whirling rotary engine and by machine gun fire routinely cracked the rigid fuel lines connecting tanks and engine. Gasoline would spew over the fuselage, causing many sudden, catastrophic in-flight fires. If the Nieuport did not catch fire, it could break up in a dive, for a buildup of airspeed could cause the leading edge of the upper wing to tear off, allowing the fabric to balloon up and leaving the wing devoid of lift.

Thus Rickenbacker and his colleagues were going to war against veteran, combat-hardened opponents—who would be equipped with superior airplanes—in a Nieuport 28 in which they had never trained and which tended to catch fire spontaneously and lose its wing in a dive. Rickenbacker could hardly wait.

It now appears fated that Rickenbacker would connect with Maj.



Already a legend for downing 17 enemy aircraft while with Lafayette Escadrille, Maj. Raoul Lufbery taught Rickenbacker aerial combat tactics and led Rickenbacker's first flight over enemy lines.

a German and to be the first to become an ace.

Double Disappointment

Lt. Douglas Campbell was to deprive him of both prizes. Campbell, along with Lt. Alan Winslow, shot down the 94th's first two German aircraft—a Pfalz and an Albatros—on April 14, 1918. Campbell also became the first official ace with his fifth victory on May 31. Rickenbacker actually scored his fifth kill on May 28 and his sixth on May 30, but neither was confirmed until after Campbell's. Campbell was acclaimed as the first ace. Though he badly wanted the honor, Rickenbacker never contested Campbell's claim.

Rickenbacker was a serious pilot, and he flew often. His first confirmed victory came on April 29 flying with Capt. James Norman Hall. Hall and Rickenbacker both dived and fired on a Pfalz, Rickenbacker closing within 150 yards before firing. The claim was confirmed even before the two pilots touched down.

The victory gave him confidence, which he sorely needed, given the hostile or patronizing treatment of his squadron mates. In an account written in 1919, Rickenbacker conceded, "There is a peculiar gratification in receiving congratulations from one's squadron for a victory in the air. It is worth more to a pilot than the applause of the whole outside world."

On a subsequent mission, Hall, a

flight leader, was shot down and captured behind German lines. Rickenbacker was named to replace Hall as a flight commander. He had been at the front for less than two months, and his total flying time was under 150 hours, but he was in charge of leading men in combat.

On May 17, Rickenbacker flew with Reed Chambers on a voluntary patrol. Bitterly cold in their open cockpits at 20,000 feet, the two men had no oxygen, just as they had no heat, parachutes, or radios. Rick spotted three Albatros fighters, and with his judgment possibly impaired from

a lack of oxygen, put his Nieuport in a headlong dive.

He fired at the first enemy airplane at about 14,000 feet, killing the pilot, and then pulled up sharply. His upper right wing failed with a tremendous crack as his leading edge ripped off and the Nieuport went into a swiftly turning tailspin. The other two enemy airplanes followed him down, snap-shooting. By applying full power, Rickenbacker managed to pull out at 4,000 feet and, controls hard over, staggered back to a hot landing at his home field.

Only two days later, Rick and the



Rushed into production, the Fokker D.VII was operational in April 1918 and became Germany's top single-seat fighter of World War I. In his autobiography, Rickenbacker described it as "maneuverable, speedy, and tough."



The French-built Spad XIII was a solid gun platform, maneuverable speedster, and considered the finest fighter developed by the Allies. Rickenbacker, sitting here in one, personally picked up the first Spad assigned to the 94th PS.

94th suffered a blow when Lufbery lost his life in an attack on a high-flying Rumpler observation airplane, leaping or falling to the ground from his flaming Nieuport.

The desire to become an ace obsessed Rickenbacker, and he flew many solo patrols, an increasingly risky business, for the Germans had just introduced what would be recognized as the best fighter of the war, the Fokker D.VII. Rickenbacker never compromised his leadership duties. He took his responsibilities as a flight leader seriously, giving newcomers lots of ground instruction and always accompanying them on their first flights over the lines.

Rickenbacker had mastered his trade; he "saw the sky" as clearly as any pilot and was able to identify enemy aircraft at great distances. He countered the enemy's technology by

making use of the Nieuport's strong features while avoiding the weak and dangerous. Rickenbacker scored victories on May 28 and 30 and reached the coveted status of ace.

Then, serious problems began.

In its first few months, the 94th had run up 16 victories and was holding its own in the battle to command the air. It then seemed to disintegrate under the force of circumstances. A new German offensive brought with it the best in German airpower. During June, July, and August, the 94th Pursuit Squadron suffered eight losses.

For most of that long summer, Rickenbacker was confined to bed with a chronic fever. Grounded for weeks at a time and often hospitalized, he nevertheless insisted on flying whenever he could drag himself to an airplane. Combat required swift climbs and swooping dives, not good for an ailing ear, and he was confined to a hospital, first to have an abscess lanced and then for a mastoid operation. His doctors assumed he would never fly again. They assumed wrong.

The Spad XIII

A lesser person might have decided that he had done quite enough; he was an officer, an ace, and he had a ticket home. He didn't see it that way. On July 5, Rickenbacker went to the huge aviation depot outside of Paris and picked up the very first Spad XIII that would go to the 94th Squadron.

The Spad XIII was an advanced version of the highly successful Spad VII and was powered with a 235-hp Hispano-Suiza geared engine. The engine was far more complex than a Gnome engine, and it was not unusual for 50 percent of all Spad XIII's to be out of action with engine problems. The pilots liked it when the engine ran, however, for it was strong and able to dive swiftly and pull out sharply with no fear of structural failure.

Rickenbacker familiarized himself with the Spad during a lull in the fighting in July and August and was able to take a significant role during the September Battle of St. Mihiel. As anxious as he was to increase his score, Rickenbacker spent most of the battle in ground attack sorties, leading his flight down to ground level. On Sept. 14, he scored his seventh victory and began a streak

Rickenbacker received the Medal of Honor and many awards from both the US and France for his World War I service. Rickenbacker poses by his Spad that bears bullet hole patches—the small circles with a German symbol.



that would end with his becoming the Ace of Aces.

On Aug. 21, 1918, Maj. Harold E. Hartney was appointed commander of the 1st Pursuit Group, which comprised the 27th, 94th, 95th, and 147th squadrons. Hartney inherited a pair of major problems. First, heavy losses in the four squadrons had produced the stench of bad morale. Second, the group was riven by a quarrel over replacing the Nieuport 28s with the Spad.

Hartney needed help. He had been observing Rickenbacker's leadership skills both in combat and on the flight line. Despite strong opposition from headquarters ("not officer material") and from some of the blue-bloods in the squadron, Hartney appointed Rickenbacker to command the 94th.

Rickenbacker was delighted and immediately called two meetings. The first was with his pilots, where he set down his rules: No nonsense on the flight line; everyone takes care of mechanics; every man to fly often; every man to be aggressive.

The second meeting was with the mechanics. He told them he knew of their problems with the Spads and would give them 100 percent support. They responded, and within weeks, the 94th's Hispano engines

were going 100 hours flying time between overhauls, compared to 30 hours in other squadrons.

In just two conversations, Rickenbacker turned the 94th around, compelling it to become the war's crack fighter unit, with more victories and more hours over the lines than any other American outfit.

On Sept. 25, Rickenbacker put his words into action. During a solo mission over the lines, he spotted a pair of German observation airplanes escorted by a flight of five deadly Fokker D.VII's. Rickenbacker attacked, killing the pilot of one Fokker, then plunged on to down an observation aircraft before diving out of the fight. For this act of daring and bravery, Rickenbacker years later received the Medal of Honor.

Rickenbacker scored twice more in September and another 14 times in October. A promotion to captain, held up by his enemies in headquarters, came in October.

"Scientific Murder"

Of much greater importance to Rickenbacker was the success of the 94th, which became the most lethal US squadron and ended the war having downed 69 enemy aircraft and receiving 18 losses. Rickenbacker



During World War II, Rickenbacker carried out special government missions as a civilian. Here, he's shown with Secretary of War Robert Patterson and Gen. Carl Spaatz (center). Below, the younger Rick in his Spad.

was truly the Ace of Aces—but he was also the CO of COs. He forged his leadership in combat, seeking battle himself, and insisting that his squadron seek it as well. He always took advantage of the odds, avoiding casualties wherever possible. Unlike most of his peers, he did not see aerial combat as some form of latter-day gallantry. He termed it “scientific murder.”

He was a master executioner. He finished the war with a total of 26 victories, the most of any American. (In World War I, partial victory credits were counted as whole credits. By today’s count, Rickenbacker’s total would be 24.3, still more than any other American.)

Rickenbacker came home as a national hero but wouldn’t capitalize on it for personal gain. He refused to appear in films and avoided making endorsements. He helped found the Rickenbacker Automobile Co., which from 1922 to 1927 produced 35,000 cars but no profits. When it went bankrupt, Rickenbacker took on the debt and paid it off in the midst of the Great Depression.

Rickenbacker had greater success with other ventures. One was renovation and improvement of the now-famed Indianapolis Speedway. Yet his greatest challenge was Eastern Air Lines, whose leadership he assumed in 1934. Rickenbacker ran the airline with an iron hand and made it one of the most profitable airlines in America.



After Japan attacked Pearl Harbor on Dec. 7, 1941, Eddie Rickenbacker volunteered his services. He refused to take cabinet-level positions in the government or accept a rank of major general in the Army Air Forces, preferring to serve the government in a civil capacity.

After some routine tours inspecting bases, Rickenbacker in October 1942 was given a top secret assignment. The Secretary of War, Henry L. Stimson, tasked him to carry a

stern reprimand from President Roosevelt to Gen. Douglas MacArthur, who had been making statements critical of the Administration. Then came an unexpected turn of events. On Oct. 21, the B-17 in which he was flying was forced to ditch in the Pacific. Rickenbacker and his seven companions spent three weeks on a raft. One man died of exposure, but Rickenbacker brought the others through.

Stimson admired Rickenbacker and used him for missions around the world during the conflict.

When the war ended, Rickenbacker returned to run Eastern Airlines. Times had changed; the competition was tougher, and he would make several serious errors in selecting equipment. For example, he opted for the ill-fated Lockheed Electra

turbojet aircraft at the very moment that other airlines were beginning to acquire jet transports. Soon, Rickenbacker was forced to turn Eastern’s reins over to others.

Rickenbacker spent his latter years traveling, making speeches, and seeing to the ghostwriting of his autobiography, *Rickenbacker*. He was, by his own estimation, “the luckiest man alive.” He died in his sleep in 1973 at 82, to be remembered forever as one of American airpower’s true giants. ■

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